

Family Ministry: The Interface between Church Doctrine and Pastoral Care

Introduction

The document known as *Lineamenta* (guidelines) on *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World*,¹ released in preparation for the 2015 Synod of Bishops on the Family, asks bishops' conferences, Eastern Catholic synods, religious superiors, as well as academic institutions and ecclesial movements to avoid formulating pastoral care of the family as a simple deduction from Catholic doctrine.

Though the *Relatio Synodi*,² the final document of the 2014 Synod of Bishops on the family, attempts to strike a "balance" between those who are concerned about a given situation being "in line with the Church's teaching" and those who give greater focus to the "individual persons," the *Lineamenta* raises once more the thorny issue concerning the relationship between Church doctrine and pastoral practice on a number of unresolved issues discussed in the 2014 October Synod, by including a series of forty-six questions precisely "intended to assist the bishops' conferences in their reflection and to avoid, in their responses, a formulation of pastoral care based simply on an application of doctrine."³ Such a formulation, the synod secretariat suggests, "would not respect the conclusions

¹ English version at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141209_lineamenta-xiv-assembly_en.html.

² English version at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html.

³ *Lineamenta*, "Questions Aimed at a Response to and an In-Depth Examination of the *Relatio Synodi*: Part I Listening: The Context and Challenges of the Family."

of the Extraordinary Synodal Assembly and would lead their reflection far from the path already indicated.”⁴

The one year between the two Synods is considered as a genuine *kairos* for the ecclesial community which is called to mature on the proposed ideas of the 2014 October Synod and to re-examine and reconsider “with renewed freshness and enthusiasm, what revelation, transmitted in the Church’s faith, tells us about the beauty, the role and the dignity of the family,”⁵ and at the same time, “with true spiritual discernment, ... to find concrete solutions to so many difficulties and innumerable challenges that families must confront.”⁶ The concluding remark of the *Relatio Synodi* precisely indicates that the door is still open to the proposals discussed at the 2014 October Synod.

The ecclesial community is encouraged on its “journeying together” to continue to listen, reflect and discern to bring Church doctrine and pastoral care into harmony with each other: “These proposed reflections, the fruit of the synodal work that took place in great freedom and with a spirit of reciprocal listening, are intended to raise questions and indicate points of view that will later be developed and clarified through reflection in the local Churches in the intervening year leading to the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.”⁷ Thanks to Pope Francis’ decision, all disputed issues discussed in the 2014 October Synod remain *quaestiones disputandae* which could be resolved by deeper reflections on the interface between what the Church teaches on marriage and sexuality and the pastoral care of those who are not living in accordance with the Church’s moral standards.

This article does not focus on which doctrine needs to be developed, or which pastoral practice is unacceptable in the light of Church doctrine. To bring the Church’s teaching and the pastoral practice into harmony with each other, one needs to go beyond the fake polarity of two Churches: the Church of mercy and the Church dominated by rules which punish the sinner. Since Church doctrine and pastoral care should not contradict each other, it is only through a process of rethinking with “renewed freshness and enthusiasm”⁸ that this thorny issue can be resolved.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Relatio Synodi*, no. 4.

⁶ Pope Francis, “Address for the Conclusion of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” October 18, 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141018_conclusionone-sinodo-dei-vescovi.html.

⁷ *Relatio Synodi*, no. 62.

⁸ Ibid., no. 4.

To our mind, what is needed is an adequate pastoral method which leads, as a result of ecclesial discernment, to a deeper and broader understanding of all the theological issues implied in this apparent dichotomy. We think that this is the way forward for understanding the Church's mission to carry out her duty "with the tenderness of a mother and the clarity of a teacher."⁹

A Major Bone of Contention

During the plenary meetings and at the ten *circuli minores* (the different language working groups), discussions on the relation between Catholic doctrine and pastoral practice were open, lively, respectful and contrasting. Moreover, during the press briefings on the work of the Synod as well as in interventions by individual bishops and cardinals to the media, the two areas in the life of the Church, namely her teaching and the pastoral practice, continuously featured as the Synod's major bone of contention. Some claim that failure to deal with problems that remain unresolved on a doctrinal level will simply lead to the Church's teaching being seen as rigid and lacking sensitivity. Others maintain that, though doctrine and pastoral care refer to two different areas of theology, they cannot contradict each other and for this reason pastoral solutions must be deduced from doctrinal truths.

A few days before the 2014 October Synod, Robert Dodaro published the book entitled *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church*¹⁰ as a response to Cardinal Kasper's book *The Gospel of the Family*¹¹ which contains the latter's address delivered during the Extraordinary Consistory of Cardinals held in February 2014. In his introductory chapter which summarizes and highlights the principal arguments of the book, Dodaro states that "this publication leads to the conclusion that the Church's long-standing fidelity to the truth of marriage constitutes the irrevocable foundation of her merciful, loving response to the individual who is divorced and remarried. This book therefore challenges the premise that traditional Catholic doctrine and contemporary pastoral practice are in contradiction."¹²

⁹ Ibid., no. 29.

¹⁰ Robert Dodaro, *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).

¹¹ Walter Kasper, *The Gospel of the Family* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014).

¹² Dodaro, *Remaining in the Truth of Christ*, 13.

Cardinal Walter Brandmüller, one of five Cardinals who contributed to Dodaro's publication, commented in an interview with the Catholic News Agency that "under no circumstances can pastoral work be in contradiction with doctrine. Actions of the Church need to – if they want to be Catholic – correspond to faith and dogma. Any pastoral ministry toward such individuals must be in alignment with this unchanging teaching of the Church, drawn from Christ's own words."¹³ Moreover, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan maintained in an interview with an Italian paper (*Corriere della Sera*) that Pope Francis will not push the Church away from the understanding of marriage's indissolubility. Regarding the possible access to communion for the divorced and remarried, he claimed that this way of thinking would end in "a separation between doctrine and pastoral care and discipline ... [and] indissolubility would be almost reduced to a Platonic idea which is not reflected in real life."¹⁴

In contrast to these comments in defence of doctrine and dogma, the Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Cardinal Reinhard Marx, remarked that "the Church's Magisterium is not a static collection of sentences, it is a development. Doctrine is in dialogue with pastoral care. Doctrine is evident, it does not depend on the signs of the times, but it can nevertheless be developed. We cannot change the Gospel. But we have not understood everything yet."¹⁵ He continues that "the effort to live it in all of the human conditions today, with all of the challenges and all of the things we have to face today, that's the pastoral practice, that's the application."¹⁶ Furthermore, Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington claimed that teaching and pastoral practice are "interrelated, but they are not the same thing. We have to make sure that the teaching is clear, it's unchanging because it comes to us from God, it comes to us from Jesus."¹⁷ However, he suggested that "just to repeat the practice of the past without trying to find a new direction today is no longer tenable."¹⁸

¹³ See interview published in *Catholic News Agency* on 5 October 2014, <http://m.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=30645>.

¹⁴ See interview published in *Corriere della Sera* on 2 December 2014, http://www.corriere.it/cronache/14_dicembre_02/ai-divorziati-niente-comunione-credo-che-papa-decidera-cosi-496cd7f0-79ea-11e4-81be-7152760d3cf5.shtml.

¹⁵ See comments by Cardinal Reinhard Marx in *Catholic News Agency* on 14 October 2014, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/amid-criticism-cardinal-marx-supports-synods-midterm-report-26962/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See interview with Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl in *Catholic News Agency* on 7 October 2014, <http://m.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=30658>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Resisting Temptations to Disharmony

During synodal discussions the indissolubility of marriage was never challenged or put into doubt. Moreover, the documents of the Synod do not question the Church doctrine on the truth and beauty of the family. On the contrary, they unequivocally defend the constant teaching of the papal Magisterium on the sacrament of matrimony. At a general audience after the 2014 October Synod, Pope Francis emphasized that the three official documents that came out of the Synod, namely the final message, the final report and the Pope's final speech took place *cum Petro et sub Petro*. The Pope's presence at the Synod was a guarantee of freedom, openness, trust and orthodoxy. He disproved assumptions about a "disputatious Church where one part is against the other. None of the speeches ... called into question the fundamental truths regarding the Sacrament of Marriage: indissolubility, unity, faithfulness and openness to life."¹⁹

It is clear that Pope Francis does not support the "Church doctrine vs pastoral care" approach, nor does he agree with the perspective that both areas of theology are contradictory or autonomous. In his concluding address at the 2014 October Synod, he referred to these mindsets as temptations which need to be forcefully resisted. He drew a contrast between the "hostile inflexibility" of those who consider themselves "masters" of the doctrine, those who are closed within the certitude of what they know without allowing themselves to be surprised by God, and a "destructive do-goodery, which in the name of a false mercy bandages wounds without first curing and medicating them."²⁰ Moreover, he compared these wrong perceptions on truth and mercy to the temptation of those who attempt to transform stones into bread to break the long, heavy, and painful fast; and also to transform the bread into a stone and cast it against the sinners, the weak, and the sick. Furthermore, he referred to the "temptation to neglect the '*depositum fidei*' [the deposit of faith], not thinking of themselves as guardians but as owners or masters [of it]; or, on the other hand, the temptation to neglect reality, making use of meticulous language and a language of smoothing to say so many things and to say nothing!"²¹

Pope Francis remarked that he was not surprised by such temptations in the Synod's animated discussions, speeches and interventions which were full of faith, of pastoral and doctrinal zeal, of wisdom, of frankness and of

¹⁹ See Pope Francis' address in the General Audience of 10 December 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141210_udienza-generale.html.

²⁰ Pope Francis, "Address for the Conclusion of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops." 18 October 2014.

²¹ Ibid.

courage, and of *parrhesia*. The relationship between traditional teaching and today's pastoral challenges of the family "should never be seen as a source of confusion and conflict."²² Any temptation to foster disharmony between Church teaching and pastoral practice needs to be vehemently resisted. It is only through collegiality, synodality and discernment that these two areas of theology find their true meaning and their proper relationship. The collegial path of the bishops and the involvement of all God's people under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is the way forward to discern and reconcile truth and mercy for all.

A Paradigm Shift in Pastoral Theology

According to part three of the *Lineamenta*, the pastoral strategy for evangelization to address today's global crisis of marriage and its doctrinal foundation presuppose a method of pastoral theology that is inspired by the Second Vatican Council and grounded in the Magisterium of Pope Francis. The pontificate of Pope Francis represents a fresh reception of the teaching of Vatican II which is characterized by dialogue with the world, listening to the world, and critical but sincere openness to human experience.

The *Instrumentum Laboris*, the *Relatio Synodi* and the *Lineamenta* propose a new pastoral approach which offers pastoral care to wounded and vulnerable families without however contradicting Church doctrine. The key words characterising this paradigm shift are evangelization, listening, mercy, truth, discernment, pastoral accompaniment and conversion. The pastoral goal of the Synod is articulated by Cardinal Parolín as follows: "The Synod is not to change the Church's doctrine, given that it is based on the Gospel. Rather, its purpose is to address the problems facing family and marriage, in order to define a pastoral strategy ranging from the local to the global level."²³

Pope Francis' pastoral mindset on marital issues endorsed in the Synod's documents does not follow the deductive approach which is based on the application of doctrine to the complex and diverse reality of the family. A deductive pastoral method based on the belief that a set of clear and unchangeable principles are considered as a "one-size-fits-all" solution to all the complexities of today's family issues seems to be untenable. The insufficiency of such a deductive approach is due to the fact that praxis is not valued as much as it should and that today's marital relationships have become much more complex and diverse than

²² Ibid.

²³ See <http://www.aleteia.org/en/religion/article/synod-on-the-family-there-is-no-need-to-fear-debate-in-the-church>.

before, due to socio-economic, political and cultural realities. For this reason, the deductive method leads quite often to wrong pastoral decisions and actions.

Nor is the pastoral approach adopted by the *Lineamenta* based merely on a type of inductive approach which makes human experience and empirical studies, adopted pragmatically and uncritically, the main determining factors of pastoral strategy. Moreover, it seems that Pope Francis goes beyond the “see, judge, act” method which is used by several documents of the Church on social Catholic doctrine.²⁴ This method takes the situation of the human person, society or human activity as its starting point, followed by judgement and then leading to action. Though this method rightly underlines the need of pastoral reflection on experience, however it has been used at times as a reactive method – reacting to the particular situation and formulating a pastoral strategy which is a specific response to that situation – and not as a proactive method.

The synodal documents, under the influence of Pope Francis’ theological and pastoral mindset, seem to be adopting what can be termed as the “empirical-critical-theological” method (or a variant of it) which frames more convincingly and adequately the issue under discussion. The method is empirical since its starting point is the empirical experience and its aim is the renewal of praxis; it is critical since it seeks to judge and evaluate human experience with the specific aim of its renewal; it is theological since in all the phases there is an explicit reference to the criteria or horizon of faith.

Basically, this method includes the following three aspects:

- a) an evaluative analysis and interpretation of the present situation;
- b) a vision and a desired praxis;
- c) a transformative process from the present situation towards the desired situation.

All these three phases include different moments which are not separated but linked to each other.²⁵

²⁴ See Raúl Biord Castillo, *Ponderación teológica del método ver-juzgar-actuar: Conferencia dictada en las XXII Jornadas de Teología y Reflexión; Criterios para efectuar un discernimiento cristiano de una situación histórica*, 23 March 2004, <http://raulbiordcastillo.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Articulo-Iter-Ponderación-teológica-del-método-ver.pdf>. Also published in *ITER* 34 (2004), 19-52. There are other methods which include very similar elements, such as the Pastoral Circle Method, having as phases: insertion/experience; social analysis; theological reflection; pastoral action. See Frans Wijzen-Peter Henriot, *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).

²⁵ Mario Midali has developed this method in *Practical Theology: Historical Development of its Foundational and Scientific Character* (Rome: LAS, 1999). He calls the three phases: (i) *kairologica*; (ii) *progettuale*; (iii) *strategica*. See also Don S. Browning’s phases (descriptive and

One can say that the *Lineamenta* for the 2015 Synod of Bishops has three main sections which are in line with this method: (i) Listening: The context and the challenges of the family; (ii) Looking at Christ: The Gospel of the family; (iii) Confronting the situation: Pastoral perspectives.

The common thread that unites the three phases is ecclesial discernment²⁶ which Pope Francis draws strongly on his Jesuit training, particularly the rules for spiritual discernment taught by St Ignatius of Loyola. Discernment is the way we come to the knowledge of God's will. So it is not just common sense, or taking prudent decisions, although these are important elements. Discernment has as its first premise the belief that God's Spirit will show us the direction we are called to take. It assumes our capacity to be enlightened by that Spirit and it requires of us the discipline to be open to what the Spirit is saying to us. Such discipline is not always easy, particularly when it means we have to let go our cherished way of looking at things or reverse a long-held opinion. Discernment is ultimately about our desire to make right judgments in accord with God's hopes for the world.

In ecclesial discernment, what is sought is always that which the Spirit of God is suggesting to the Church and the way that the Spirit is indicating. This is possible through a special gift of the Spirit, the gift of counsel. Through this gift, God guides the Church by the advice which comes from Him, in the midst of a myriad of opinions and interpretations. Through the Spirit, one definitely realises the limits of human effort and one understands that one is unable to dominate all events that happen and to make a clear prediction, or form the outline, of future events. Being open to the Spirit means that the decisions taken would have the character of a collaborative response.

So basically it is a question of a pastoral-theological method, and that which links all different phases of the method is ecclesial discernment.

Evaluative Analysis and Interpretation of the Present Situation

In the first phase, one is expected to analyse, describe, interpret and evaluate a specific situation and praxis with the help of human sciences and faith. The specific aim of this approach is to understand correctly and discern adequately the signs of the times that the Holy Spirit provokes to the community of believers

historical, systematic, strategic) in *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996).

²⁶ See Sergio Lanza, "A proposito di discernimento," in *Convertire Giona: Pastorale come progetto* (Rome: Edizioni OCD, 2005), 119-131.

in a specific historical context.²⁷ This approach has its profile in the Argentine variant of liberation theology, which is not focused on a Marxist evaluation of the economic and political situation of the poor and oppressed, but is “a theology of the people,” one which takes the experience, wisdom and piety of all Catholics seriously.²⁸

The actual situation is analysed against the horizon of past data and its impact on the present. The analysis of the situation does not stop at a descriptive level since it is not simply a sheer acceptance of the status quo. The task is that of critically interpreting and evaluating the situation in the light of the Gospel and in response to human aspirations. It is an attempt to see God’s presence in today’s world, even though human experience is not perfect. Accordingly, theology and human sciences do not only play a descriptive but also a hermeneutical role.²⁹ At this stage one is even expected to put into question certain historical forms of religious and ecclesial practice.

Moreover, the analysis and the interpretation of the situation are not carried out haphazardly or arbitrarily but on the basis of specific values and criteria inspired by faith and reason. These criteria include doctrinal principles, moral norms, and deep human aspirations. The difference from the deductive (application) method lies here: these criteria are not to be *applied* to the situation, but used to analyse, describe and interpret it. As a result of this analysis and interpretation, one can arrive at values which ought to be preserved, aspects to be excluded or abandoned, aspirations that should be met, problems to be resolved, new values and cultural expressions, and events to denounce or reject. The present historical reality is interpreted as the *kairòs*, a special historical moment and opportunity for creative renewal.

Pope Francis’ approach, which takes as its starting point the data of experience, is inspired by his belief that the lived experience of people is a theological source and a place of theological reflection. When we discuss marriage and family we have to listen to what people who are living this reality have to say. Here the Church needs to discern the *sensus fidelium*. Accordingly, rather than starting

²⁷ See Michael Kirwan, “Reading the Signs of the Times,” in James Sweeney, Gemma Simonds and David Lonsdale, *Keeping Faith in Practice: Aspects of Catholic Pastoral Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 49-63.

²⁸ See Juan Carlos Scannone, “El Papa Francisco y la teología del pueblo,” *Mensaje*, August 2014: 18-21, http://www.amerindiaenlared.org/upload/libros/1407169642_attach37.pdf.

²⁹ See Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains*; Manual for Practical; Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), particularly “The Hermeneutical Perspective,” 178-200. See also Jean-Guy Nadeau, “Une méthodologie empirico-herméneutique,” in *Précis de théologie pratique*, ed. Gilles Routhier and Marcel Viau, 2nd enl. ed. (Brussels: Lumen Vitae, 2007), 221-234.

from above, from a doctrine or theory and taking an ideal model of the family and imposing it on reality, this approach starts with open-minded reflections on reality. This method of theological reflection, which starts with the discernment of the concrete daily experiences of married people, is in sharp contrast to an approach which deduces pastoral practice from general, sometimes idealised notions of God, humanity or marriage.

In the run-up to the synodal meetings, Pope Francis initiated this first phase of pastoral method by launching an unprecedented worldwide survey of Catholic experience of family life today, distributed in October 2013.³⁰ The questionnaire touched on the whole gamut of issues related to sex and marriage, including matters that had previously been regarded as taboo. The questions were addressed to bishops, asking them to describe the opinions and practices of the people as well as their catechetical initiatives. Lay people who responded to these surveys knew that they were given a chance to participate actively by making their views heard.

It is interesting to note that Pope Francis' pastoral method is in line with the explanation of Gospel discernment proposed by John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*:

Knowledge of the situation is important. However, simply to provide data is not enough; what is needed is a "scientific" inquiry in order to sketch a precise and concrete picture of today's socio-cultural and ecclesial circumstances. Even more important is an interpretation of the situation. Such an interpretation is required because of the ambivalence and at times contradictions, which are characteristic of the present situation where there is a mixture of difficulties and potentialities, negative elements and reasons for hope, obstacles and alternatives, as in the field mentioned in the Gospel where good seed and weeds are both sown and "co-exist" (cf. Mt 13:24ff).³¹

John Paul II then explains how critical such an analysis and interpretation should be, and underlines the fact that even negative factors can have hidden values which need to be affirmed:

It is not always easy to give an interpretative reading capable of distinguishing good from evil or signs of hope from threats... it is not sufficient simply to

³⁰ See the Preparatory Document for the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Vatican City, 2013, particularly the questions in Part Three, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20131105_iii-assemblea-sinodo-vescovi_en.html.

³¹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis* (25 March 1992), no. 10, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html.

welcome the positive factors and to counteract the negative ones. The positive factors themselves need to be subjected to a careful work of discernment, so that they do not become isolated and contradict one another, becoming absolutes and at odds with one another. The same is true for the negative factors, which are not to be rejected *en bloc* and without distinction, because in each one there may lie hidden some value which awaits liberation and restoration to its full truth.³²

One should here recall that in line with the explanation of Gospel discernment and the pastoral approach of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the *Relatio Post Disceptationem* had referred to the importance of recognizing the “positive elements even in the imperfect forms that may be found outside this nuptial situation,” such as common-law marriage and cohabitation.³³ Indeed, when common-law marriages “reach a notable level of stability” and are “characterized by deep affection” and responsibility toward offspring, they “may be seen as a germ to be accompanied in development towards the sacrament of marriage.”³⁴ As far as cohabitation is concerned, the *Relatio Post Disceptationem* affirmed that there is a growing number of cases in which cohabiting couples eventually decide to marry if they receive the right accompaniment and help. It cited situations of couples who choose to live together without marriage for economic or cultural reasons, or those in Africa who enter into traditional marriages in “stages,” and said that in response the Church must keep its “doors always wide open. ... In such unions, it is possible to grasp authentic family values or at least the wish for them. Pastoral accompaniment should always start from these positive aspects.”³⁵ These statements did not eventually feature in the *Relatio Synodi*, but they are in line with the pastoral approach indicated by *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

Pastores Dabo Vobis maintains that for “a believer the interpretation of the historical situation finds its principle for understanding and its criterion for making practical choices in a new and unique reality, that is, in Gospel discernment. This interpretation is a work which is done in the light and strength provided by the true and living Gospel, which is Jesus Christ, and in virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”³⁶ The Gospel discernment is not simply the gathering and recording of the events and circumstances of a particular historical situation, but a task, a challenge and a call from God articulated in a particular historical situation.

³² Ibid.

³³ See “Synod 14 - Eleventh General Assembly: ‘Relatio post Disceptationem’ of the General Rapporteur, Card. Peter Erdo, 13 October 2014,” no. 18, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/13/0751/03037.html>.

³⁴ *Relatio post Disceptationem*, no. 22.

³⁵ Ibid., no. 37.

³⁶ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 10.

Accordingly, today's trends in marriage structures and family patterns are a challenge and a call to the ecclesial community to renew its trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the source of wisdom, counsel and knowledge "all of which are at the centre of making wise choices, of staying on a discerned course, of cutting through extraneous information and getting to the heart of issues so that judgments or decisions are based on the truth of things rather than on opinion, hearsay, appearances, partial information, and, above all, fear of change."³⁷ The Holy Spirit enriches the Church with the special gift of fortitude which enables her to hold fast to true wisdom to discern the signs of the times and to creatively respond to these new challenges by novel pastoral strategies on how to proclaim the truth and beauty of the family and God's unfailing love and mercy to all wounded families.

The Vision and Desired Praxis

After taking as starting point the current situation as experienced by people, groups, whole communities or local Churches, and reflecting critically on all its dimensions and complexities, one should then raise the question concerning which vision is to be adopted and what kind of praxis is to be desired. The primary objective of the second phase of the "empirical-critical-theological method" is therefore the identification of a vision and long term goals which can be a source of motivation and inspiration for a renewed and more authentic praxis.

One is expected to make explicit the underlying vision firstly concerning marriage and the family. What is the Christian vision of marriage and the family? How is this vision a source of inspiration for contemporary culture? However, this phase seeks to broaden the theological perspective because the vision of marriage and the family has to be contextualized within the wider horizon of evangelization today. So here one has to raise questions such as: Which Christ do we want to announce? What is the core message of the Gospels? Which vision of the Spirit and of his work do we have in mind? Which experience of Church do we want to promote? Which models of community do we want to adopt? Which service to people, in the present situation, do we want to offer? Which changes in society do we want to encourage according to the Gospel's primary message?

The Second Vatican Council, papal pronouncements, documents of episcopal conferences and local Churches, the contribution of theologians and other scholars are all important sources in this reflection. The criteria do not

³⁷ Michael Lawler, Todd A. Salzman and Eileen Burke-Sullivan, *The Church in the Modern World: "Gaudium et Spes" Then and Now* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 57.

follow the personal or group preferences, but they are spelt out in connection to the Jesus event and the ecclesial community, in dialogue with human sciences such as psychology, sociology, pedagogy, etc. It is not a static but rather a developing and dynamic reflection which introduces new horizons of meaning.

Which vision is the Synod, under the influence of Pope Francis, projecting? Pope Francis is inviting the ecclesial community to broaden its pastoral vision, priorities and perspectives to become empowered to rethink, re-evaluate and reassess the complex situations in today's family relations from a new horizon of theological meaning and significance which takes into account all the different facets and dimensions of human experience. This pastoral approach does not require a change in Church doctrine on the indissolubility and unity of marriage, faithfulness and openness for life, or the theology of Eucharist and Reconciliation.

Pope Francis' vision of the renewal of the Church's pastoral ministry is motivated primarily by "the joy of the Gospel."³⁸ It is a return to the Gospel that has motivated all reform movements within the Christian community from the development of monasticism to the reforms of St Francis of Assisi and St Dominic. Pope Francis does not represent a liberal position, but a radical one – one which goes back to the roots of the Christian faith which is the Gospel listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed. While building a bridge back to our origins, he is encouraging the ecclesial community to come to a broader consensus in constructing a bridge to the future.

A Wider Perspective from the Periphery

A main characteristic of Pope Francis' theological and pastoral vision is his innovative concept of periphery. This perspective suggests that it is possible to get a wider perspective of the current state of the world looking from the *edge* rather than from the *centre*. It is a new way of outlining an alternative world-view consisting of rethinking the present state of affairs of the world starting from the periphery rather than from the "headquarters" of Church doctrine. As Pope Francis says:

I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history were realized when reality was seen not from the centre but rather from the periphery. It is a hermeneutical question: reality is understood only if it is looked at from the periphery, and not

³⁸ We shall focus especially on Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013) which explains the pastoral vision of Pope Francis.

when our viewpoint is equidistant from everything. Truly to understand reality we need to move away from the central position of calmness and peacefulness and direct ourselves to the peripheral areas. Being at the periphery helps to see and to understand better, to analyze reality more correctly, to shun centralism and ideological approaches.³⁹

It is a clear preference for an interpretation of the family life that is decentralized and non-idealized. Beyond the curtains of an idealized picture of the family, there is an alternative existential reality that is often neglected and marginalized that is worth exploring to truly understand the unfolding historical process of family relationship. More fundamentally, Pope Francis intends to anchor his reflections on the family on the direct experience of the true life of and in the periphery:

This is really very important to me: the need to become acquainted with reality by experience, to spend time walking on the periphery in order really to become acquainted with the reality and life experiences of people. If this does not happen we then run the risk of being abstract ideologists or fundamentalists, which is not healthy.⁴⁰

The Church as a Pilgrim People of God

Antonio Spadaro, the chief-editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, remarked that different Church models emerged during the Synod: “At the end of the Extraordinary Synod, we believe it is necessary for the entire Church to reflect not just on specific questions, but thanks to these, also on the ecclesiological model it embodies. This allows us to understand the Church’s mission in the world and its relationship with history.”⁴¹ The divergent positions on the thorny issue on the interface between Church doctrine and pastoral care are ultimately the result of divergent approaches and interpretations of the Church.

Pope Francis’ ecclesiological vision is rooted in the metaphor of the Church as the pilgrim people of God. He calls for a missionary Church. Though he refers to the language of the new evangelization so central to both John Paul II

³⁹ Antonio Spadaro, “‘Wake Up the World’: Conversation with Pope Francis about Religious Life,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 1 (2014), 3-17. English translation of the original text in Italian by Donald Maldari.

⁴⁰ Philip Jenkins, “A Peripheral Vision,” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2014/02/a-peripheral-vision/>.

⁴¹ See <http://www.lastampa.it/2014/10/30/esteri/vatican-insider/en/the-synod-according-to-jesuit-periodical-la-civilt-cattolica-zW9z0FQbICt7JJsQtxjjAO/pagina.html>.

and Benedict XVI, he however introduces a subtle nuance to his predecessors' theology of mission. Pope Francis uses the term to highlight the fundamentally centrifugal thrust of the Church's activity and the need for Christians to enter into a deeper and more profound solidarity with the world. It is for this reason that he frequently refers to one of his favourite expressions, the "smell of the sheep."⁴² An evangelizing community wants to get involved in the world and in people's daily lives, it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be.⁴³

For Pope Francis, the Church's mission does not begin with the language of condemnation but with a humble openness to "a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter"⁴⁴ which, in the end, is an encounter with Christ. The centrifugal orientation of the Church requires that it goes "forth to everyone without exception."⁴⁵ He writes: "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."⁴⁶ We need, he insists, a Church "that knows how to open her arms and welcome everyone."⁴⁷ In his interview, Pope Francis goes further: "Instead of being just a Church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a Church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself ... to those who have quit or are indifferent."⁴⁸

This new ecclesial mindset of Pope Francis which is evident in his evocative image of the Church as a "field hospital" that goes out to meet the wounded on the battlefield of life to heal them and to warm their hearts, understands the missionary role of the Church not simply in terms of merely addressing the needs of the poor and the marginalised, but also in terms of a learning process from them, from their participation in the *sensus fidei* in which they teach us the suffering Christ. We need to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace

⁴² See, for example, Pope Francis' Homily at the Chrism Mass in St Peter's Basilica, Holy Thursday, 28 March 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html.

⁴³ See *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁷ Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis," *America: The National Catholic Review*, 30 September 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.⁴⁹ This image is the opposite image of a fortress under siege.

How then can the Church, as a field hospital, be present to the world? The *Relatio Post Disceptationem*,⁵⁰ the *Relatio Synodi*,⁵¹ and the “Message” together provide an answer. They unanimously speak about the Church as a “Guiding Torch” in relation to a Church as a “Beacon.” The Church, in fact, is a *lumen* - a light - because upon its face the Church reflects the light of Christ, who is in turn the *Lumen Gentium*.⁵² Yet this light can be understood in at least two different ways, which are not however mutually exclusive. The Church can first be understood as a “beacon.” This beacon sheds light, but it is also statically fixed on solid foundations. Yet we can also understand the Church as a “torch.” What is the difference between the beacon and the torch? The beacon stays put. It is visible, but it doesn’t move. The torch, instead, sheds its light on the way, as it walks amongst humanity. It illuminates those human beings that are closest, shining upon their hopes, but also upon their sadnesses and fears.⁵³ The Church as guiding torch is called to accompany human persons along their journey, to be in contact with their actual experience. Instead of blinding humankind with an unbearable light, the Church illuminates their journey step by step.⁵⁴

Pope Francis emphasizes this “missionary option,” which should inspire all the Church’s life, as follows:

... a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ See *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 198.

⁵⁰ *Relatio post Disceptationem*, no. 23.

⁵¹ *Relatio Synodi*, no. 28.

⁵² See Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution “Lumen Gentium,”* no. 1.

⁵³ See Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution “Gaudium et Spes,”* no. 1.

⁵⁴ See Antonio Spadaro, “The Church in a Synodal Journey,” *America: The National Catholic Review*, 7 November 2014, <http://americamagazine.org/church-synodal-journey>.

⁵⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 27.

This commitment to a missionary church has led the Pope to criticize a more bureaucratic way of dealing with pastoral issues.⁵⁶ He has complained that “the Church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules.”⁵⁷

Listening Church

Another feature of Pope Francis’ ecclesiological vision is his call for a “listening Church.” He speaks positively about a Church that is committed to honest dialogue, listening, and even disagreement. In his interview, “A Big Heart Open to God” he reflects on the meaning of *sentire cum ecclesia*. It means thinking with the *whole* Church and not just the ones who count ecclesiastically. It means daring to enter into a “complex web of relationships” and living in receptive solidarity with all God’s people. It means recalling not only the infallibility of the Church’s teachers but also, as the Council taught, the infallibility of the believing Church. In a genuine listening and disarming Church, Pope Francis wants to include those who are in ecclesial exile of one kind or another.⁵⁸

The “Pastorality of Doctrine”

Pope Francis’ understanding of Church doctrine is firmly rooted in the Council’s commitment to what Christoph Theobald has termed as “the pastorality of doctrine.”⁵⁹ This approach to Church doctrine has its origin in Pope John XXIII’s influential opening address at the Council, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*.⁶⁰ Pope John called for a Magisterium that is fundamentally pastoral in character. His vision was not simply to have a Council that offers a mere repetition of previous doctrinal formulations, but rather a genuine effort to rethink Church doctrine in view of the pressing questions of the time. The Council followed the Pope’s lead and consistently treated doctrine as something to be authentically interpreted and faithfully lived within concrete historical, cultural, and pastoral contexts.

⁵⁶ See *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 63.

⁵⁷ Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God.”

⁵⁸ Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The ‘Francis Moment’: A New Kairos for Catholic Ecclesiology,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 69 (2014): 72, <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/article/view/5509/4988>, 72.

⁵⁹ See Christoph Theobald, “The Principle of Pastorality at Vatican II: Challenges of a Prospective Interpretation of the Council,” http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/stm_sites/c21online/pdf/legacy-translation.pdf.

⁶⁰ See http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html.

Pope Francis has a particular interest and commitment to the pastorality of doctrine as he insists that doctrine must be interpreted in relation to the core Christian *kerygma* and in the light of the particular pastoral context. In his address at the plenary session of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Francis expressed his understanding of doctrine in one sentence: "In reality, doctrine has the sole purpose of serving the life of the People of God and it seeks to assure our faith of a sure foundation."⁶¹ Moreover, in an open letter to the founder of the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Eugenio Scalfari, the Pope admitted to a certain reluctance to speak of "absolute truth," not because he was a "relativist" but because, for Christians, truth is mediated through a relationship with a person, Christ. As such, truth is always encountered in history.⁶² Furthermore, in his interview with Antonio Spadaro, Pope Francis states: "The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the Church must be ministers of mercy above all. ... Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus."⁶³

Pope Francis's recontextualization of doctrine is seen in his retrieval of one of the most neglected themes of the Second Vatican Council, the "hierarchy of truths." In his interview with Antonio Spadaro, he states that "the dogmatic and moral teachings of the Church are not all equivalent."⁶⁴ The Council in *Unitatis Redintegratio* states that: "When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith."⁶⁵ In this brief passage, the Council introduced a crucial distinction between the content of divine revelation, understood as God's self-communication in Christ by the power of the Spirit, and those Church doctrines which, in varying degrees, mediate that content.

Unfortunately, since the Council there have been little references to this statement in Magisterial documents. One should also note the reformulation

⁶¹ See "Address of Pope Francis to Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 31 January 2014," http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/january/documents/papa-francesco_20140131_plenaria-dottrina-fede.html.

⁶² "Letter to a non-Believer: Pope Francis responds to Dr Eugenio Scalfari Journalist of the Italian Newspaper 'La Repubblica,'" 4 September 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130911_eugenio-scalfari.html

⁶³ Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Vatican Council II, *Decree on Ecumenism* "Unitatis Redintegratio," no. 11.

by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) which states that “some dogmas are founded on other dogmas which are the principal ones, and are illuminated by these latter.”⁶⁶ The difference in formulation is significant. Whereas Vatican II introduced a crucial distinction *between* doctrine and the more fundamental Christian *kerygma*, the CDF asserted only that doctrines vary in their relations one to another. The principal consequence of the CDF’s reformulation was a severe restriction of the field of application for the hierarchy of truths.⁶⁷

Pope Francis has reminded us of the true meaning of the Council’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths in *Evangelii Gaudium* when stating that doctrines are not ends in themselves; they serve us when they draw us into life-giving relationship with Christ. He writes:

All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council explained, “in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.” This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching.⁶⁸

Pope Francis interprets the Council’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths as more than just ranking doctrines; the Council wished to relate doctrine to something more basic, the Christian *kerygma*. He writes:

Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing.⁶⁹

This passage from *Evangelii Gaudium* shows that Pope Francis is not afraid to affirm Church doctrine as basic to Christian identity, but he consistently

⁶⁶ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (24 June 1973), no. 4.

⁶⁷ See Gaillardetz, “The ‘Francis Moment,’” 77.

⁶⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 36.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 35.

orients that doctrine toward the basic Christian *kerygma* and situates it within the pastoral life of the Church.

In his comments Pope Francis has already given concrete examples of the pastorality of doctrine. It is evident in his openness to a rethinking of the Church's teaching on the possibility of communion for the divorced and remarried. He has no wish to reverse Church teaching on marital indissolubility, but he is committed to placing it within the field of Christian mercy. In his interview with Antonio Spadaro, Pope Francis referred to Christians who live in situations that from the point of view of the Church are irregular or somewhat complex; Christians that, in one way or another, live with open wounds. These are divorced and remarried, same-sex couples and other difficult situations. What kind of pastoral work can we do in these cases? What kinds of tools can we use? The Pope responds: "We need to proclaim the Gospel on every street corner ... preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing, even with our preaching, every kind of disease and wound."⁷⁰

Pope Francis gave us another example in his discussion of Pope Paul VI's teaching on artificial birth regulation in *Humanae vitae*. In a March 5, 2014 interview he responded to a direct question about adherence to this controversial Papal teaching:

It all depends on how the text of *Humanae Vitae* is interpreted. Paul VI himself, towards the end, recommended to confessors much mercy and attention to concrete situations. But his genius was prophetic, as he had the courage to go against the majority, to defend moral discipline, to apply a cultural brake, to oppose present and future neo-Malthusianism. The object is not to change the doctrine, but it is a matter of going into the issue in depth and to ensure that the pastoral ministry takes into account the situations of each person and what that person can do. This will also be discussed on the path to the Synod.⁷¹

This statement by Pope Francis resonates John XXIII's call for a deeper penetration of Church doctrine and its more pastoral realization. This does not reflect a pastoral compromise on the demands of Church teaching, but an authentic interpretation of the doctrine apprehended within a specific cultural and pastoral context.⁷²

⁷⁰ Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God."

⁷¹ <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/494/41/-pope-sees-scope-for-pastoral-response-to-contraception-ban>, reporting interview of Pope Francis with Ferruccio de Bortoli, editor-in-chief of *Corriere della Sera* published on 5 March 2014, http://www.corriere.it/cronache/14_marzo_04/vi-racconto-mio-primo-anno-papa-90f8a1c4-a3eb-11e3-b352-9ec6f8a34ecc.shtml.

⁷² See Gaillardetz, "The 'Francis Moment,'" 78-79.

Pope Francis is not concerned with either a simple reaffirmation or reversal of the Church's official teaching but rather with a deep reconsideration of what John Langan calls the Church's "stance." For Langan, "stance" is distinct from a specific doctrinal formulation. To consider the Church's "stance" on an issue is a matter of "critical reflection on the tradition to clarify what strengths are to be preserved and what continuities are to be affirmed, even while searching for the sources of limitations in the teaching and acknowledging the development of new questions and problems."⁷³

A change in stance may or may not bring about a development in Church doctrine. What it does allow for is a consideration of hitherto neglected factors and insights. However, some continue to press whether such a change in "stance" would inevitably lead the Pope to reverse this or that controversial Church teaching. Such a question can be answered by looking at the way doctrine develops in the Church. There is a common misconception that doctrinal development occurs primarily by ecclesiastical decision. On the contrary, history shows that doctrine develops when pastoral contexts shift and new insights emerge such that particular doctrinal formulations no longer mediate the saving message of God's transforming love. The gradual shift in the Church's condemnation of usury offers us a classic example of what is meant here. That teaching was not reversed in a single papal decree. Rather, there was a gradual and halting pastoral discernment that the teaching, in its classical formulation, no longer served the central values it was intended to protect, namely the welfare of the poor. A similar development is observed in the Church's teaching on capital punishment and on religious freedom.

Beyond doubt, Church leaders may contribute to the development of doctrine. However, they could only do that when they do what Pope Francis has been insisting upon so far. They need to move from the centre to the periphery and see, in specific pastoral contexts, how doctrine actually "works," that is, how it contributes to bringing people into a saving encounter with God's abundant love and mercy.⁷⁴

A Church of Mercy and Justice

Pope Francis' doctrinal and pastoral approach is rooted in a vision of a missionary Church that is tirelessly engaged in the world to show the face of God's mercy which is at the centre of the Gospel. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he says:

⁷³ See John Langan, "Understanding Pope Francis' Statements on Homosexuality," *America: The National Catholic Review*, 10 March 2014, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/see-person>.

⁷⁴ See Gaillardetz, "The 'Francis Moment,'" 79-80.

“An evangelising community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy.”⁷⁵

He emphasizes this point in several instances. For Pope Francis, “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”⁷⁶ We need “a Church that is again capable of restoring citizenship to so many of its children that walk as if in exodus.”⁷⁷ Christian citizenship is above all the result of God’s mercy.

This approach is not a betrayal of Church teaching, but rather the centre of its identity as a sign and sacrament of God’s love in the world. The Pope’s teaching on mercy shows that, as St Thomas Aquinas said, God is not bound by our rules of justice. God is love and because he is true to himself, he is merciful. John Paul II had already underlined the centrality of mercy in his Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, where he says that mercy “constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of his mission.”⁷⁸

Some of the forty-six questions of the *Lineamenta* take the theme of mercy head-on, asking: “How can people be helped to understand that no one is beyond the mercy of God and how can this truth be expressed in the Church’s pastoral activity towards families, especially those which are wounded and fragile?”⁷⁹ While avoiding any unjust discrimination, how can such persons receive pastoral care in these situations in light of the Gospel? How can God’s will be proposed to them in their situation?”⁸⁰ Quoting St Thomas Aquinas, Pope Francis explains the centrality of mercy as follows:

Thomas thus explains that, as far as external works are concerned, mercy is the greatest of all the virtues: “In itself mercy is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies.

⁷⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷⁷ “Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro: Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil: Address of Pope Francis, 28 July 2013,” http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130727_gmg-episcopato-brasile.html.

⁷⁸ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Dives in Misericordia”* (30 November 1980), no. 6.

⁷⁹ *Lineamenta*, Questions aimed at a Response and In-Depth Examination of the “Relatio Synodi,” question no. 20.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, question no. 40.

This is particular to the superior virtue, and as such it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree.”⁸¹

There might be a misunderstanding on what mercy is all about. Some think that mercy is cheap grace or pastoral weakness. However, mercy is a very demanding virtue; it does not soften the commandments of the Lord, nor does it weaken dogmas. But as it is the fundamental virtue according to St Thomas Aquinas, mercy is a hermeneutical key for interpreting the commandments. With his constant focus on mercy and his insistence that the Church and its pastors recognize the reality people are living in, Pope Francis hopes to discover new pastoral ways to reach people and bring them closer to Christ. The most important message in pastoral care is the proclamation that Jesus Christ is saviour. The ministers of the church must be dispensers of God’s grace and mercy above all.

A Transformative Pastoral Process

The third phase of the pastoral method is a journey from the present situation towards a desired state of affairs. A true pastoral strategy for family ministry becomes a journey of transformation when the empirical findings concerning the family today are critically evaluated and interpreted in the light of a theological vision which broadens rather than restricts the horizons of meaning and interpretation. This discernment process is the way forward for the Church’s ministry for the family since such a process opens up innovative and creative avenues for pastoral care. This is the ripple effect of the theological-pastoral critical reflection which cannot be left simply to the creativity and experience of pastoral workers or to spontaneity. It cannot be satisfied by the attitude: “this is the way it has always been done”⁸².

A transformative pastoral process⁸³ is the result of a systematic reflection which attempts to identify through discernment, in the light of the desired vision, those steps in pastoral practice, such as a change in attitudes and perspectives, which need to be taken in accordance with the Gospel. Moreover, it aims to identify those attitudes and mindsets that need to be overcome since they are inspired merely by human interests and the eclipse of the whole truth. This dynamic process is not a betrayal of doctrine but rather faithfulness to the whole truth. A

⁸¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 37.

⁸² *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 33.

⁸³ See Elaine Graham, “Practical Theology as Transforming Practice,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 104-117.

change of attitude is required particularly for “those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance. This might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But in fact such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel.”⁸⁴

So it is not just a question of reacting to current issues by applying doctrine. It is a much more demanding process of discernment which ultimately does include other important tenets of Church teaching which might have been ignored or given less importance. The challenge which the 2015 Synod is facing is to indicate the highlights and steps of this journey of transformation rather than seek to provide ‘solutions’ to all complex issues being discussed.

Pastoral Conversion

Pastoral conversion is a top priority in the Synod of the Family. This renewal does not concern only individuals but the entire Church.⁸⁵ Change of attitudes is the primary requirement of this pastoral conversion. In his interview with Antonio Spadaro, Pope Francis remarked that the structural and organizational reforms are secondary. The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to enter into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors who care.

The documents of the Synod of Bishops on the family are explicit in their call to the Church to support and nourish today’s marriages and family life by re-examining its pastoral attitudes, approaches and structures in the light of a pastoral conversion.

Neither a rigorist nor a lax attitude is the right pastoral approach. On the one hand, the rigorist does not see the person but the rule. On the other hand, we cannot be lax when it comes to sin, as if sin does not exist. What is needed is to reach out and to see the person before the rule. As Pope Francis remarked: “The rigorist washes his hands so that he leaves it to the commandment. The loose minister washes his hands by simply saying, ‘This is not a sin’ or something like that.”⁸⁶ This pastoral conversion, which is the result of one’s openness to the whole truth of the Gospel, is crucial for overcoming the temptation of stifling legalism as well as the soft-headed compassion which pretends that sin does not exist.

⁸⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 40.

⁸⁵ See *ibid.*, no. 26.

⁸⁶ Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God.”

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis states that the Church's pastoral and missionary mission needs conversion in order to rediscover and renew its central moral commitment, namely our response to God's love. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured! Christian morality "is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults."⁸⁷ A morality which becomes detached from its core Gospel message risks becoming an ideology that enslaves rather than liberates:

All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love. If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church's moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk. It would mean that it is not the Gospel which is being preached, but certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options. The message will run the risk of losing its freshness and will cease to have "the fragrance of the Gospel."⁸⁸

Moreover, Pope Francis warns the Church to resist the temptation of rendering religion a form of servitude. Precepts and rules are important and indispensable. However, these should be contextualized within a broader perspective of the Gospel message. Pastoral conversion is needed to avoid a rush attitude of deductive reasoning leading to the application of moral principles to particular complex situations without searching for a prudential moral judgment which takes seriously into consideration the faith journey of persons involved:

At the same time, the Church has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people's lives. Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God "are very few." Citing Saint Augustine, he noted that the precepts subsequently enjoined by the Church should be insisted upon with moderation "so as not to burden the lives of the faithful" and make our religion a form of servitude, whereas "God's mercy has willed that we should be free." This warning, issued many centuries ago, is most timely today. It ought to be one of the criteria to be taken into account in considering a reform of the Church and her preaching which would enable it to reach everyone.⁸⁹

The pastoral care of families needs conversion from a legalist attitude since this is a symptom of doctrinal insecurity and a sign of narrow, static and inward-looking perspective. Pope Francis states that:

⁸⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 39.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 43.

“If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal “security,” those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists — they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies. I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person’s life. God is in everyone’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else — God is in this person’s life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God.”⁹⁰

Pastoral Accompaniment

Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, emphasizes that “accompaniment” is crucial to this transformative pastoral process. He refers to this pastoral approach as the “art of accompaniment” which “teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.”⁹¹ Moreover, in his interview with Spadaro, Pope Francis states that “The Church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbour. This is pure Gospel. God is greater than sin.”⁹²

The issue of pastoral accompaniment was at the foreground of the 2014 October Synod discussions. The *Lineamenta*, quoting *Evangelii Gaudium*, indicates that this issue shall once more be discussed at the 2015 October Synod since it needs further reflections: “Synod discussion highlighted the need for a pastoral line based on *the art of accompaniment*.”⁹³ Christ wanted his Church to be a house with doors always open to welcome everyone, without leaving anyone out. Hence bishops are called to accompany couples and families and care for their personal and social wounds.

In the Pope’s ecclesiological vision, pastoral accompaniment is rooted in the Emmaus story. Similar to Jesus who accompanied the two disciples who were

⁹⁰ Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God.”

⁹¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 169.

⁹² Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God.”

⁹³ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, introduction to section on Caring for Wounded Families, nos. 44-54.

sad and disappointed on their way to Emmaus, the Church needs to overcome fear of encountering people on their way. “We need a Church capable of entering into people’s conversation. We need a Church able to dialogue, as Jesus did with those two disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, were wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning. We need a Church capable of warming hearts; a Church capable of leading people back to Jerusalem.”⁹⁴

The art of accompanying others starts with a non-judgmental attitude towards others. Pope Francis stated many times that the Church needs to be less judgmental and more open in accordance with the Gospel spirit. Compassionate language must replace the language of condemnation. When Pope Francis told reporters the frequently misunderstood statement “Who am I to judge?,” he wanted to express the Church’s mission of accompaniment. He did not criticise the Church’s teaching on homosexuality. However, what he meant is that the doctrine makes sense within the broader understanding of the Gospel message and the art of accompaniment.

In his interview with Spadaro, Pope Francis remarked that “a person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: ‘Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?’ We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. It is necessary to accompany them with mercy. When that happens, the Holy Spirit inspires the priest to say the right thing.”⁹⁵ His non-judgmental attitude towards persons who are not living according to the Church’s moral standards is articulated in *Evangelii Gaudium* as follows:

One who accompanies others has to realize that each person’s situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without. The Gospel tells us to correct others and to help them to grow on the basis of a recognition of the objective evil of their actions (cf. Mt 18:15), but without making judgments about their responsibility and culpability (cf. Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37). Someone good at such accompaniment does not give in to frustrations or fears. He or she invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind and go forth ever anew to proclaim the Gospel. Our personal experience of being accompanied and assisted, and of openness to those who accompany us, will teach us to be patient and compassionate with

⁹⁴ “Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil: Address of Pope Francis, 28 July 2013.”

⁹⁵ Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God.”

others, and to find the right way to gain their trust, their openness and their readiness to grow.⁹⁶

Again in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis invokes traditional moral reasoning and basic Christian values to underpin his pastoral vision. Accompaniment with compassion and care must replace condemnation and exclusion. He says that it is only in this way that we can “enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives. But this always demands the patience of one who knows full well what Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us: that anyone can have grace and charity, and yet falter in the exercise of the virtues because of persistent ‘contrary inclinations’. In other words, the organic unity of the virtues always and necessarily exists *in habitu*, even though forms of conditioning can hinder the operations of those virtuous habits.” Here the Pope emphasizes the need for “a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery. Reaching a level of maturity where individuals can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience.”⁹⁷ This leads us to the “law of graduality” which is the other side of the coin of pastoral accompaniment.

The “Law of Graduality”

In Christian life, pastoral accompaniment is the step-by-step guidance which families need in their search for improvement in moral behaviour. “Graduality” (sometimes termed also “gradualness”) can be considered as a pastoral attitude which takes into consideration the difficulties that can separate real families and persons from the Christian ideal. Many of the Synod fathers spoke of the “law of graduality” – a concept that at one level observes that there are gradations of virtues and vices, and that living situations need not be either completely good or completely evil.

In his opening address of the 2014 Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Péter Erdő of Hungary said that *Humanae Vitae* should be read in light of graduality.⁹⁸ Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich also invoked graduality as a key to helping the Church develop a new way of talking about sex.⁹⁹ Cardinal Vincent Nichols

⁹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 172.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 171.

⁹⁸ “Synod 14 - First General Congregation: ‘Relatio ante Disceptationem’ of the General Rapporteur, Card. Peter Erdo, 6 October 2014,” <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/06/0712/03003.html>.

⁹⁹ See Catholic News Service of 7 October 2014, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/>

explained it as “a law of pastoral moral theology which permits and encourages people ... to take one step at a time in our search for holiness.”¹⁰⁰ Even if someone’s situation is far from perfect, this does not mean it has no moral value. It is better to encourage the positive elements in people’s life rather than to castigate them for their mistakes.

This is, in fact, an anthropological principle. It considers the human person not as an ethical test-taker, getting some questions right and others wrong, but as a pilgrim, journeying through peaks and valleys towards goodness.¹⁰¹

In fact, the *Relatio Post Disceptationem* refers to the “law of gradualness” as “the fruit of discernment applied on a case-by-case basis ... that takes into consideration the distinction between state of sin, state of grace and the attenuating.”¹⁰² As a pastoral strategy, graduality can be an effective, even necessary approach in order to lead people more deeply into the moral and spiritual life of the Church.

Some theologians have mistakenly made of this concept the basis for a permissive attitude to moral norms, treating them merely as ideals. Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, cautioned about this misinterpretation when stating that “what is known as ‘the law of gradualness’ cannot be identified with ‘gradualness of the law.’”¹⁰³ And in guidelines for confessors in 1997, the Pontifical Council for the Family stated that they should not be led by the law of gradualness to give people the impression that repentance does not require a decisive break with sin.¹⁰⁴

In his *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II declared: “What is needed is a continuous, permanent conversion” that “is brought about concretely in steps which lead us ever forward. Thus a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually.” He added that man “day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth.”¹⁰⁵

One can here recall what Pope Benedict XVI said in an interview with a German journalist that if a male prostitute uses a condom to try to avoid

cns/1404149.htm.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas Collura, “Graduality,” in *National Catholic Reporter*, 14 October 2014, <http://nronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/graduality>.

¹⁰² *Relatio post Disceptationem*, no. 47.

¹⁰³ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation “*Familiaris Consortio*” (22 November 1981), no. 34.

¹⁰⁴ See Pontifical Council for the Family, *Vademecum for Confessors Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life*, 12 February 1997, no. 9, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_12021997_vademecum_en.html.

¹⁰⁵ *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 34.

infecting people with HIV/AIDS, it can be “a first step in the direction of a moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way towards recovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants.”¹⁰⁶ Benedict was not questioning the Church’s teaching, but he was saying that concern for others could be a step in a gradual movement of change.

Pope Francis explains how important this awareness of graduality is when pastors and lay people accompany others in their journey, and particularly in the sacrament of confession. Even small steps should be appreciated and encouraged:

Moreover, pastors and the lay faithful who accompany their brothers and sisters in faith or on a journey of openness to God must always remember what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches quite clearly: “Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.” Consequently, without detracting from the evangelical ideal, they need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur. I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best. A small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties. Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.¹⁰⁷

Concluding Reflections

Our main focus in this article has been the need of an adequate pastoral method that could enlighten the Synod of Bishops in its discussions and deliberations on the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and contemporary world.

In the light of the *Lineamenta*, we suggest that the “empirical-critical-theological method” (or a variant which includes the same elements) seems to be a very adequate pastoral method to understand the relationship between Church doctrine and pastoral practice. It takes as starting point the contemporary empirical situation, then moves on to elaborate the vision which broadens the horizon of evaluation and interpretation and hence the projected and desired

¹⁰⁶ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times; A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 119.

¹⁰⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 44.

praxis, and finally sets the process that leads to the transformation of pastoral practice. It is a dynamic hermeneutical process that accompanies people to move forward to the rich experience of the Gospel core message. It is a process of ecclesial discernment which leads to the respect and acceptance of the whole truth.

One might raise the question about the advantages of this approach to the issue of the interface between Church doctrine and pastoral care over the traditional approaches such as casuistry, the distinction between objective and subjective order, etc.

Whereas the traditional approaches are constrained by their deductive method of moral reasoning by simply applying Church doctrine to concrete situations, the approach we are proposing focuses on the person who is on a journey of spiritual and moral growth. It sets the roadmap, but it is more concerned with the person and the journey than the roadmap itself.¹⁰⁸

How should we move forward on this pastoral journey? Pope Francis has repeatedly insisted that, if we truly are on our way, the road will open step by step. We must proceed with the guidance of consolation. That is to say, we must proceed by our interior perception of the presence of God, and a complete trust in him, rather than letting ourselves be guided by our fear or our anxieties.

Ultimately it is an adventurous journey inspired by an open vision, rather than cutting short our voyage and opting to remain in a secure and comfortable place in the shadow of a partial vision of the truth.

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¹⁰⁸ See *ibid.*, no. 82.